

ABUNDANCE FOR AMERICA

Summary of Rural-Urban Women's Conference
With the Secretary of Agriculture, April 13-14, 1939

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DO WE HAVE ABUNDANCE IN AMERICA?

Using this question as a springboard for the opening discussion, the conference came to the agreement that American people do not have abundance. Various situations were cited in support of this viewpoint.

Typical of the evidence presented by farm women was that of one rural homemaker who reported from her experience in Iowa, where the land is supposed to be A-No. 1, that many houses are not painted, many are in ill repair, and only about one-fourth have electricity. She added that only about 8 percent of the tenant homes in Iowa have running water in them.

City women pointed to the slums, with as many as 400 people crowded into one block, as evidence that abundance is lacking. One woman said that farm goods do not find their way into these city homes because the families cannot buy, and that if it were not for free lunches, children would faint in the schools. Another stated that there are almost one million working people in families whose incomes are less than \$800 a year. One delegate summed up the lack of abundance with the phrase, they are "sick of pork and beans."

CAN AMERICA PRODUCE ABUNDANCE?

The opinions expressed by the conferees could be summarized in the statement of one woman who said that it could be done by a better distribution of the wealth of the country--by great numbers reemployed in industry, and by cooperation of industry, labor, farmers, and the Government. "We have the capacity to produce," she said, "but not the capacity to buy the things we can produce."

Through statistics introduced into the discussion it was pointed out that the country could have produced, with the plant then existing, a national income of 125 billion dollars in 1929 instead of the approximate 90 billion which it did produce. All families who have buying power less than the equivalent of \$2,000 a year could have a buying power of \$2,000 a year, without changing at all the income of families that have more than that and without changing any of the existing prices. In other words, all families could live at least as well as those who have \$2,000 now live, while everyone above that could still live as well as they lived in 1929. That is assuming that all of the increased production were somehow distributed to those who now have less than \$2,000.

WHY DON'T WE HAVE ABUNDANCE?

After agreeing that the United States does not have abundance, although possessing the potential means for that abundance, the women asked themselves the question, "Why?"

Price Policies

Discussing the problem of distribution, talk finally led to policies of restricted production and price control. One delegate voiced the opinion that industries which are highly monopolized, and for that reason are able to control the market, are able to control the price for which an article is sold, whereas those wherein a considerable extent of competition exists, as in women's and men's clothing industries, do reduce their prices. Another woman contributed the statement that through the depression, 1929 to 1933, the prices of steel and automobiles and all the big, basic industrial products were not reduced substantially.

Investment Policies

It was pointed out that in those industries which are monopolistic, the industries can choose to retain an unduly large share of the returns for their own pockets and disburse a smaller part of that as buying power for the community than they would be forced to do under competition. It was said that through the period 1923 to 1929, when output had increased 20 percent, payments in the form of dividends and interest increased 50 percent, while during the same period wages did not increase. Payments going to those who do not expend increased $2\frac{1}{2}$ times as fast as the payments going to the great mass of the population who might have consumed the products had they been given the buying power. In other words, only a small part of the profit in industry is returned to consumption channels.

Wage Policies

Wage policies and their effect upon purchasing power were brought up. One farm woman said that farmers knew if the wage earner didn't have sufficient wages to purchase the food needed for his family that the farmer couldn't purchase the products of industry.

In the discussion that developed, the interrelation of the problems of the farmer and laborer became more pronounced, and many of their problems were seen as common difficulties.

WHAT DO WE NEED IN AMERICA FOR MORE ABUNDANT LIFE?

Discussion on this question led off on food and diets, with two points predominant in the group thinking: (1) Many people do not have adequate diets because they lack the necessary resources for producing or purchasing the foods they need, and also often lack the knowledge of what food combinations constitute economical but adequate diets. (2) Some have the needed

resources, but fail to make effective use of them -- because of ignorance, indifference, or lack of appreciation of the importance of adequate diets.

The thought was brought out that both education and greater purchasing power are necessary in the matter of achieving adequate diets. One delegate from the South said that while her family had always made a good living from the farm, many farmers ate sidemeat and beans who could have had tomatoes, green beans, and other garden products. She introduced this as a point in favor of education for better diets, and the contribution home production could make to better diets.

Speaking from her experience with relief agencies last year in Detroit, one woman placed purchasing power first in importance. She reported that many relief clients, as well as low income families, would squeeze out of their food allowance needed money for carfare or other necessities. While some people may be in a position to grow more nutritive diets, it cannot be done "on the back steps of a city tenement house."

This discussion was limited to food and diets since it was felt that a detailed analysis of the food problem would represent an example of the approach which would have to be used in discussing two other basic needs-- clothing and shelter. This problem also represents one of the few fields in which a definite standard of measurement of adequacy exists. While it was agreed that further knowledge of ways to use well what we have is essential, it was emphasized that this alone is not the solution of the problem of abundance.

Education was considered as a second typical example of the need for greater abundance. One delegate pointed out that in her state 42 percent of the rural children who get through the 8th grade do not go to high school, because of lack of income, lack of clothes, and lack of transportation.

This led to discussion of transportation difficulties, economic factors which operate to interfere with attendance at school, and the inability of communities to support high standards of education.

One voice spoke out in favor of vocational education in high schools as well as college, some means for providing definite training for particular types of work. The need for emphasis on home economics education down through the grades was mentioned.

Adult education was emphasized, but the discussion always revolved around the economic factor, the inability of people who suffer from under-privilege to take advantage of existing educational facilities. Federal aid for education was mentioned as a national need.

WHAT WOULD "YOU" DO TO SUPPLY ABUNDANCE IN AMERICA?

The first reply to this question was, "I would start industry and put people to work." Another maintained that buying power must be provided for city people by industry as a necessary first step in securing abundance. A third said that if industry alone could not solve the problem, ways of supplementing efforts of industrial producers should be sought.

The reason advanced by the farm woman who made the suggestion was that if industry could create buying power for farm products, the farmer in turn would be able to buy manufactured goods. The suggestion was backed by a representative of the urban group. This was followed by calling attention to the need for a better understanding between labor and the farmer.

In citing means of bringing about a better understanding, one rural homemaker proposed meetings for city and farm people at which the interdependence of the two would be stressed. One delegate phrased it this way, "I think we of the economic middle class have got to begin to take in the

fields where the main differences are, before we can understand what we are talking about and what they are talking about. Whatever plans you set up for education--and fundamentally that has got to be a part of any program--must include a means for attaining that better understanding."

"Reciprocity days" for rural and urban women, and an exchange of background knowledge by city and country school children, were mentioned as means of developing a better understanding.

Trade barriers entered into the discussion, with mention being made of milk inspection laws as an example of laws which serve as "tariffs" in interstate trade. Truck regulations and others were named as affecting interstate trade.

The middle man and extra services were brought up, the point being made that the consumer could "dictate" respecting these extra services, determining their value and desirability.

Government investment as a means of solving the problem of unemployment was again mentioned, with the ideal method seen as one in which Government and private investment planned, around a conference table, what action should be taken.

This plan works from the bottom up, not from the top down--it begins in the community and works up into a state plan, and finally a national plan.

WHAT STEPS CAN BE TAKEN BY THE CONFERENCE PRESENT?

The first step suggested was that delegates carry back to their home communities the spirit of these discussions and to go ahead with the same type of meeting in their local areas--get around a conference table, discuss points of common interest and thresh out difficulties.

A consumer from Massachusetts recommended their plan--a Consumers' Institute, in which all groups are represented, labor, industry and agriculture, and all work together.

As an example of the democratic process in national problems, an explanation was made of the Government's cooperation with farmers in soil conservation. These farmers plan and run their own program, with technical advice and help from Government bureaus.

Although still in the experimental stage, another plan was mentioned, whereby the Government in cooperation with retail grocery stores, is developing a program for distributing surplus foods through the regular channels of trade by increasing the food purchasing power of needy people. As an indirect benefit from this program, the grocers were said to believe that such a distribution plan would lead to a faster turnover generally of foodstuffs.

WHAT CAN AN AGRICULTURAL POLICY CONTRIBUTE TO BETTER LIVING?

In the circulation of ideas, it was felt that not only was it necessary to trade viewpoints among groups such as business, industry, labor, agriculture, and Government, but among sectional areas of the country--as in the cotton belt and the wheat region. Thinking thus returned to the earlier suggestion of getting together within the States, then in regions, and nationally. In turn this brought out the idea that a national agricultural program was not for rural people only but should be directed toward the general welfare. Further, it was stated that only within very recent years has there existed a series of Government efforts in agriculture which could truly be characterized as a national policy in agriculture.

Government efforts to deal with the serious problems of farm tenancy were examined. One woman asked, "When 32 percent of the farmers do not own their land and when great numbers of people are 'broke' has this any relation to general welfare?" This discussion led the group to consider, as an example of farm-urban relationships, the effects of tenancy.

To show that cities were and should be interested in rural needs, one delegate said that since cities to a great extent depend for population upon farm children going into the cities, the health and education of those children has an important bearing upon the welfare of city people--hence the seriousness of the problems bearing on present tenancy conditions.

The women finally agreed that farm ownership affects the general welfare, in substantiation of which one voice called attention to desirable citizenship--people who live long enough in one place to vote, to know who represents them in Government, and to enter into community relationships, tend to develop stronger feeling of citizenship.

Listing some of the ways in which agricultural policy had contributed to better living, one delegate named soil conservation, the ever-normal granary plan, rehabilitation, distribution of surplus food, crop insurance, and the effort to attain parity in farm prices, as definite aids to city consumers as well as to farmers.

In answer to the question, "Is the Department of Agriculture doing enough to create greater abundance for the American home?", thinking returned to the idea that the effort of one department alone is not enough--that there should be general cooperation among all government departments toward achieving abundance.

Believing that the discussion had contributed to a greater understanding of problems of both rural and urban groups, one delegate summed up their purpose in the quotation, "Coming together is a beginning, thinking together is progress, working together is success."

There was a new realization that in a democratic form of Government, the people are the governing factors. Recognizing the discussion as a challenge, the women agreed that only as they took their new conception and new understanding of the problems of other groups back to the organizations which they represented would the meeting be successful.

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